

A GIFT FOR ALL PEOPLE

Easter Day, 2013: John 20:1-18

At the heart and centre of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead. There are things that Jesus says to his disciples in the gospels that we call hard teachings: "Love your enemies; do good to those who persecute you." "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt." But surely Jesus' resurrection is the hardest teaching of all.

Like all the others, it calls first on our faith, and then on our discipleship. Like all of the others, it is not something we debate, because we recognize that it is born of the same Wisdom that gave birth to the gospel Jesus taught his followers; to the very Word of God that he embodied. It was just three months ago at Christmas, that the same author who relates to us today the miraculous events of Easter morning proclaimed. "the Word became flesh and lived among us." Christ Jesus, in the full expression of his humanity and the full revelation of his divinity, is nothing less for us than the embodied Word of God; Christ Jesus, in his humble birth, his remarkable ministry of teaching and healing, his magnificent life, his passionate suffering, his horrific crucifixion, and his glorious resurrection is nothing less for us than the gospel itself. "What does Christian discipleship look like?" we ask. We need only receive the testimony of Jesus of Nazareth, and then begin to live as he lived; to live, what is called, the risen life. "Look to Jesus," wrote the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Saint Francis, we presume, had to pull together Jesus' proclamation for the sake of his congregation in Assisi. The novitiates in what became known as the Franciscan order were probably not able to read the Scriptures. It is possible that the prayer that is attributed to Saint Francis was a teaching prayer, a prayer Francis used for the spiritual formation of those who gathered under his leadership.

"Lord, make us instruments of your peace," Francis prayed. "Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

The message of Easter is precisely this: that each hour of each day of our lives, because of our faith in Jesus and his resurrection, we participate in the transformation of the world in which we live; that we not accept the unacceptable when it comes to the devaluation of human life, when it comes to the destruction of the earth, when it comes to the disintegration of society, when war and greed and self-indulgence and survival and domination are the chief preoccupations of the human race.

As many of you know, I have been inspired by the holy example of Francis I. After years of discredit, Christianity is beginning to be seen in a new light, because one person a lifetime ago devoted himself to living the risen life and is now in a position of visibility and influence that will, especially for those who are members of Christ's church, inspire a renaissance, if you will, of Christian discipleship; a rediscovery of the excellence of the life that is lived beyond self to the glory of God and to the benefit of all humankind.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals how shallow are the values that lead us to take life into our own hands. The redemption of our world, the gift for all people is this hard-but-magnificent teaching that calls first upon our faith, and then upon our discipleship. Living the risen life lifts us above sin and death to the redemption of the world. We can glimpse it in Francis. We can see it clearly in Jesus. Jesus prays that others will glimpse it in us.